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Calligraphic Theories of Medieval China

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SUMMARY

Introduction

Calligraphy refers to the acts and works of handwriting, and calligraphic theories can be defined as methods for learning and appropriately comprehending calligraphy. The medieval period in China is roughly equivalent to the 2nd to 8th centuries AD, which corresponds to the latter half of the Eastern Han to the first half of the T'ang. The introduction describes the classification of calligraphic theories and provides an overview of their development in medieval China, followed by a fundamental investigation of the calligraphic theories that are referred to in this book.

Chapter I The Verse Genre *Shih*, concerned with Calligraphic Scripts, and its Milieu

Shih 勢, which was prevalent during the Wei-Chin and Southern Dynasties, is a genre of verse dealing with calligraphic scripts and bearing a title consisting of the name of a certain script followed by either *shih* or *chuang* 狀. Ten works of this genre have survived, including four quoted in the well-known *Ssü-t'i-shu Shih* 四體書勢 (*The Shih of Four Scripts*). Sentences of each *shih* work can be divided into two sections, one describing the origins and significance of the script under consideration and the other describing its shape or form. In this chapter, it is evidenced that the

shih genre was established not during the Eastern Han era, as has hitherto been assumed, but from the Wei through to the Western Chin.

Chapter II The Idea of Calligraphic Scripts in Chang Huai-kuan's *Shu-tuan*

Chang Huai-kuan 張懷瓘 is a major calligraphic theoretician of the T'ang era, and *Shu-tuan* 書斷 is his most important work. In this work, he divides a large number of past calligraphers into three grades. Although this method is derived from past calligraphic criticisms, he offers a more accurate evaluation by placing each calligrapher into multiple grades according to their scripts. In order to define this categorization, he describes the histories and characteristics of ten scripts. This chapter aims to investigate how these ten scripts were chosen and arranged by Chang Huai-kuan, and how his unique view of scripts improved his calligraphic criticism.

Chapter III The Use of Sources in Chang Huai-kuan's *Shu-tuan* and Popular Treatises on Calligraphy

The theories on calligraphic scripts and calligraphers in Chang Huai-kuan's *Shu-tuan* were developed on the basis of copious references cited from many written sources. In this chapter, the general rules for the use of sources in *Shu-tuan* are deduced based on an analysis of all the usages. These characteristics of writing show Chang Huai-kuan's orientation toward orthodox calligraphic studies, as well as a perspective that divides calligraphic literature into orthodox theories that are worth consulting for their scholarly merits and popular treatises that are not. Contrary to its basic orientation toward orthodox calligraphic studies, the way in which

Shu-tuan was read in later times drew it closer to popular treatises.

Chapter IV Calligraphic Secrets before the Early T'ang

In this chapter, a calligraphic secret is defined as a written work that is credited to a master calligrapher, enumerates some secret words about calligraphy and needs to be concealed. It was verified that before the early T'ang, three calligraphic secrets existed: *The Twelve Senses* 十二意, *Illustration of the Brush Array* 筆陣圖 and *Essay on the Force of Brush* 筆勢論. Analysis of these secrets shows that they generally advanced from calligraphic models to secrets, from images to texts, from appreciation to learning and from objects to means. These characteristics possess some similarities to other arts such as painting and annotation of classics learned by the literati in those times.

Chapter V Views of Individual Style and Method in the Literary and Calligraphic Theories of the Wei-Chin and Southern Dynasties

The view of individual style from the latter part of the Eastern Han to the Wei-Chin is characterized by negation of technique, represented by several terms including *yün* 韻 (resonance). Literary theories from the Wei-Chin to the Southern Dynasties also used the same terms, but limited the meaning of *yün* to prosody. In calligraphic theories, *tzū-hsing* 字形 (shape of written character) represents technique, while *pi-shih* 筆勢 (force of brush) signifies negation of technique. Literary theories extended their aesthetic focus from individual style to prosody or *pi-shih*, while calligraphic theories, on the other hand, extended their aesthetic focus from *pi-shih* to *pi-fa* 筆法 (brushwork), which resulted in a view of method together with prosody.

Chapter VI The Birth of *Pi-shih*: Calligraphic Theories from the Wei-Chin to the Early T'ang

The word *pi-shih* 筆勢 is formed by the words “brush” 筆 and *shih* 勢, and each of these concepts raises important issues. This chapter is aimed at investigating these issues and reviewing the concepts found in calligraphic theories. *Shih* basically means “shape” or “status”, but also refers to internal force in calligraphic theories. Brush is the effective imagery of authors, and in calligraphic theories, we can also find the concept of written characters taken as “traces of brush” 筆跡. People in the Southern Dynasties pursued the internal force of *pi-shih* where the brush made contact with the fingers, while searching the calligraphy by Wang Hsien-chih 王獻之 for different qualities than those demonstrated in the works by his father, Wang Hsi-chih 王羲之.